

## Creating Community from a Physical Distance

### Insights and Reflections from a Bilingual Teacher Educator

**Michelle Soto-Peña**

*California State University, Stanislaus*

#### Abstract

Education is an act of love. One may argue however, that because it is such a personal act, it is difficult and nearly impossible to achieve it in an authentic manner beyond the face-to-face interaction of teacher and student. Yet, we now live in a time in which education has been transmitted to a virtual platform. This paper highlights how I navigated the virtual world as a bilingual teacher educator to create community and connection among bilingual teacher candidates (BTCs) as Covid-19 changed the course of life and instruction. I begin by discussing the challenges faced when reimagining how virtual education can serve as a tool to authentically foster critical inquiry, praxis, and transformative education processes for multilingual learners. I then discuss how I utilized Freirean pedagogy as my moral and pedagogical compass to implement a four-phase approach to foster a transformative virtual environment: cultivating online social equality; promoting self-care to protect mental health; engaging in inward connections for learning; and writing the personal as political. Through this process, BTCs cultivated a transformative community built on self-reflection, trust, and shared vulnerabilities.

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*Michelle Soto-Peña is an assistant professor of liberal studies in the College of Education, Kinesiology, and Social Work at California State University, Stanislaus, in Turlock, California. Email address: msotopena@csustan.edu*

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## Disquisition

*The World Imagined*

I had it all planned out. Over the previous two years, I conceptualized and created a bilingual literacy course for bilingual teacher candidates (BTCs) rooted in critical pedagogy and transformative education. This course was not going to be any regular teacher preparation course, but my dream course; an opportunity to connect theory to practice in the most authentic and participatory way. The course was rooted in participatory action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2013), with critical theory as its moral compass (Freire, 1970). According to Kemmis et al. (2013), action research is a methodology in which the researcher is involved in developing a question with the goal of solving a real-time problem. In this process, the researcher collects data and uses these data to readjust and refine the approach taken to solve the problem at hand. In my course, BTCs would work alongside K-6 students at a local school in our neighboring community. They would learn about action research and how they could employ it to support the growth and development of their students. They would work with students during an after-school program to plan, assess, and reflect upon their practice in professional learning communities.

Although, the structure of my course was designed around the action research process, it was rooted in the key tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). A transformative process in which teachers relinquish their power and serve as mutual partners in a dialectical process of problem-posing methodologies, according to Freire, implementing critical pedagogy depends upon questioning not only the texts we read, but also the world around us (1970). For my course, BTCs would be tasked with integrating the transformative process of critical pedagogy through critical curriculum development.

*The World Unimagined*

As a teacher, I have come to expect that all my plans can change midflight, dissolving quickly like a sandcastle's encounter with the rising tide. But the Covid-19 pandemic felt even more destructive, like a tsunami wave hit me with little warning. Within a matter of days, the day-to-day routine of life stopped. Our campus shut down, local schools followed suit, and we got word from Governor Gavin Newsom that the entire state would shelter in place. I quickly realized our teacher credentialing processes were not designed to withstand the disruption of a pandemic. School districts closed their doors, and as they transitioned to online learning, some decided to limit even BTCs' virtual contact with students to protect them

from any unintended negative consequences. These policies resulted in BTCs' inability to complete their fieldwork hours or meet the objectives of the courses we designed. The final weeks of teaching during Spring 2020 can best be described as a house on fire. Everyone I knew in teacher education seemed to be trying to put out the flames and simultaneously reconstruct the structure to prevent a collapse.

As the semester came to an end, it was clear no relief or resolve about what the fall semester might look like would occur over the summer. I immediately signed up for every online training course imaginable. I was determined to figure out how to transform a course that was heavily dependent on face-to-face interactions into a virtual platform within one month. Throughout this process I learned many things: (1) there are virtually no bilingual teaching demonstration videos (free or subscribed) that align with the Teaching Performance Expectations and bilingual program standards set by the state of California; (2) there are very few resources that discuss dual-language instruction in a virtual setting; and (3) community engagement and parent involvement (essential components of bilingual education) are difficult to model online.

Moreover, to assume that I (or anyone) could completely modify a course under the conditions of Covid-19 within one month was both unrealistic and unfair. Unrealistic because, like many other faculty members, I was already juggling all of my work-related responsibilities—committees, professional development, emergency meetings, student support groups (e.g., to process the systemic racism pandemic against the Black community, including police violence), preparing a portfolio for tenure review, writing manuscripts, coordinating a bilingual education program, and preparing for classes. Unfair because, like others, I also struggled to balance my role as a parent with no access to childcare or familial support nearby. In preparation for the fall, I found myself spending my summer months attempting to complete all my work responsibilities during toddler nap sessions, after bedtime routines, and with the support of children's television programming. It was difficult to keep my resentment at bay as the lines between home and work blurred, and my child became ever more dependent on streaming entertainment. My experiences navigating the balancing act as a "scholar mama" reflected just one layer in the complex personal barriers that emerged due to the pandemic.

I wasn't the only one struggling. Teacher candidates within my institution were juggling the logistics of online learning, as they grappled with family unemployment, exposure and recovery from the virus, anxiety, and depression. Due to the government shutdown, several of my BTCs assumed roles as primary care providers for their families, while taking on additional jobs to supplement income loss. Many BTCs who worked

within essential industries began to email me of their exposure to, or illness from, Covid-19. These added responsibilities and stressors affected their engagement in the course, ability to complete assignments, and access to other opportunities within our program that would require the commitment of a fulltime job. Within the Covid-19 context, it became my responsibility to revamp the course mid-stream to ensure that we were all safe and connected as we addressed student learning outcomes. Continuing business as usual was clearly not an option.

## Dispatch

### *The World Reimagined*

Through the experiences outlined above, I learned one very important lesson, there is little consistency or reliability when living in a Covid-19 world. Due to this new reality, I decided to make a difficult decision that was counterintuitive to the heart of the course I had designed. Rather than connecting outward to school-site placements and virtual observations, I decided to reconstruct my class in a way that facilitated an inward focus on BTCs' personal transformation. In this process, I implemented a four-phase approach in fostering a transformative virtual environment. I first designed an equity-oriented participation structure to ensure students were not negatively impacted for missing synchronous meetings due to personal circumstances. Then, I implemented virtual routines that promoted self-care to support students in prioritizing their mental health. Once the culture of the course was established, I employed transformative pedagogical practices that walked students through a process of internal reflection and dialogical writing activities.

### ***Phase One: Fostering Online Social Equality***

The first step toward promoting an equitable engagement system was to guarantee synchronous attendance did not determine the participation grades BTCs received in class. This shift was prompted by two emails I received at the start of the semester from BTCs who were recovering from Covid-19. Although they insisted on attending class synchronously, I assured them that all course materials (including lectures) would be recorded and uploaded onto our course learning management system (LMS) so that they didn't need to worry about being "present" at synchronous lectures if they weren't feeling well. This initial effort allowed me to establish a base of online social equality (Rovai, 2002) so that students would be able to equitably participate with the course content.

Meeting with students synchronously, as well as providing alternative opportunities to engage in the learning process, better assured BTCs could interact with the course content despite the challenges of their personal circumstances.

***Phase 2:  
Promoting Self-Care to Protect Mental Health***

Once the course meeting structures were in place, I attended to cultivating a culture of love and self-care (Prilleltensky, 2008). I began with weekly check-ins. First, I asked BTCs to respond to polls using word cloud exercises, popcorn sharing, discussions in the chat box, or thumbs up/thumbs down. For two weeks, I noticed their responses were the same—“tired,” “anxious,” “overwhelmed,” “depressed.” As I began to probe further, I realized their feelings were not generally reflective of the course, but more adequately described their current life circumstances. This low energy manifested in their inability to connect and engage throughout synchronous conversations. Small group breakout sessions rapidly veered into off-topic venting sessions, while whole group discussions were met with silence. These observations prompted yet another adjustment in my instructional approach. At the start of every class, I guided students through a mindful meditation in which BTCs reflected on the adversity they faced, then visualized their power to overcome that adversity. Meditating prior to the start of class set a tone of self-empowerment that later influenced their engagement in synchronous meeting sessions. Subsequent to the introduction of this practice, BTCs appeared more focused on the process of learning, teaching, and improving their craft during small group break-out sessions, and more connected with their peers during whole-group discussions.

***Phase 3:  
Inward Connections for Learning***

Given that my pedagogical approach is rooted in critical pedagogy and predicated on recognizing students and instructor as equals engaged in a mutual dialectical process towards co-liberation for a transformative world, in my reimagined course, BTCs engaged in learning modules that prompted them to practice various reading strategies that promoted meaning making of different text types. For example, BTCs learned to pay particular attention to how they metacognitively processed information when reading from a text using the content learned in the module (e.g., text features and text structures of a genre). Synchronous meetings that followed these exercises were then centered on problem-posing methodolo-

gies (Freire, 1970) dedicated to reflecting on the various strategies BTCs employed during their reading process. BTCs then had an opportunity to meet with their peers via breakout sessions to strategize how they would convert these strategies into a two-minute demo lesson on Flipgrid. This process allowed BTCs to assess their own learning (as if they were students), and then plan instruction based on the lessons learned. As BTCs completed this process of self-reflection and critical inquiry, they began to slow down and note how they engaged with a text.

This activity allowed BTCs to empathize with their future students by identifying the strengths and areas of growth in their own learning processes. Conversations about creating a classroom literacy culture no longer centered on the needs for compliance, standardization of education, and scripted curriculum of a school site, but instead focused on how to engage students in developing a passion for learning, designing learning experiences, and fostering classroom cultures in which students feel empowered to share their thinking without fear of judgement. I realized then, that human connection and transformative education need not be absent in online learning. Rather, an attention to building authentic learning experiences centered in shared vulnerability allowed our collective to reimagine what felt impossible.

***Phase 4:  
Writing the Personal and Political***

The fourth phase of the course bridged the personal and political through counter narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). During the first day of class, I introduced the essay *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* (Anzaldúa, 1987), in which Anzaldúa describes the liberation one feels when living in the “Borderland,” an in-between space that exists for multi-cultural and linguistically diverse populations. Outside of the Borderland, Anzaldúa highlights the tensions within the rigid structures of linguistic purity and the culturally imposed constructs of national identity. In the Borderland, however, one exists outside these binaries, and within the fluidity of language, culture, identity, and nationality.

It is clear however, that we cannot always live in Anzaldúa’s Borderland. As a bilingual education coordinator, I observed the deleterious effects of an emphasis of linguistic purity in the temperaments of BTCs when deciding to pursue a bilingual authorization. These observations prompted me to interrogate notions of linguistic purity in my own class. One way I fulfill this charge is by sharing my own story, centered in the work of Anzaldúa. As a Latinx Californian native, I was schooled under the deficit-oriented policies of Proposition 227 (“English for the Children”)

(Ovando, 2003), in which students of diverse linguistic backgrounds were encouraged to enroll in English immersion programs and speak English exclusively at home. The rationale behind this language model was to expose students to as much English as possible to ensure their proficiency. There was little attention or concern, however, for the corresponding systematic erasure of my mother-tongue—*español de Puerto Rico y El Salvador*—in the process of English immersion. Moreover, due to my cultural background, I also encountered racial microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015) related to assumptions about my proficiency in the English language.

My story, however, does not end as a testimony of exclusion and alienation. Instead, I use my story as a form of protest and empowerment, where I describe the beauty of living within the Borderland, a place of resistance. The assumptions made about me reflect the challenges many multilingual people face when living outside of the Borderland. This is where I centered the course's writing assignments. I began the unit by writing a counter narrative in Spanish (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002), centering my experiences of living within the linguistic Borderland of English and Spanish registers. In this process, I modeled the open vulnerability needed to tell my story, ignoring the feelings of anxiety and judgement that come easily when sharing the most intimate pieces of my language and identity. I then asked BTCs to assess my counter narrative, and to provide critical feedback to improve my writing. The action of being vulnerable with my own struggles was designed to foster a sense of mutual trust among my BTCs, with the hope of them feeling safe enough to replicate the process and share with their peers.

My efforts in sharing my vulnerabilities did not go in vain. BTCs began to draw connections across our collective experiences as they entrusted their peers with their counter narratives written in the Spanish language. Each week BTCs wrote prompts that reflected the genres of writing discussed in class—narrative, expository, opinion, etc. Each genre was strategically connected to identity development in order to model asset-oriented practices grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014). BTCs were also strongly encouraged to write in the Spanish language for four purposes: (1) to practice writing in the target language, (2) to take note of their own writing strengths and areas of growth, (3) to identify the writing strategies they employed to improve their craft, and (4) to bridge their writing processes to tangible instructional practices they could later implement with their future students.

In addition to meeting the assignment objectives outlined above, the most fulfilling outcome emerged in the reflections shared in small-group instruction during breakout sessions when some BTCs described

that they felt more comfortable writing in English. To this end, many of them initially drafted their counter narratives in English, then submitted their papers through Google Translate to convert their writing into Spanish, before editing and revising the final product. Rather than reprimanding BTCs for their use of translation software, I asked them to reflect on the feelings that emerged when engaging in this process. Several BTCs mentioned feeling “anxious,” “insecure,” “overwhelmed,” and “disconnected” with their mother tongue. As I listened to these responses, I tried to connect their feelings of anxiety and frustration to the potential feelings of their future students. I then prompted them to imagine asking their future students to write in the target language and to consider how they would foster a safe learning environment for them. Clearly a useful exercise when working with BTCs, this process should not be limited to bilingual education contexts, but extended to all our credential candidates who serve students of diverse linguistic backgrounds.

It’s important to note, also, that while some BTCs struggled with writing in the Spanish language, others felt strength in expressing their ideas without the need of translation software, dictionaries, or thesauruses. These BTCs became valuable sources of support and morale for all BTCs because they modeled empathy, compassion, and consideration for their peers, resulting in an even safer space for navigating the writing process. This increased sense of safety and community was evident toward the end of the course, as teacher candidates expressed interest in editing and revising their writing with their peers and setting personal goals to improve their grammar. My role as a partner in this process was not only to provide feedback (when needed), but to name the process, feelings, and relationships that emerged over the course of the semester. My goal was to cultivate their capacity as critical thinkers and lifelong learners within the field of education. Indeed, they achieved this goal as they began to teach themselves and each other. This process felt like an authentic experience of co-liberation, in which “A teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches; but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 1970, p. 67). In this experience, I learned to release my authoritative power as an instructor and to have faith in BTCs’ ability both collaborate with and lead their own journey toward linguistic liberation.

### Final Reflections

#### *The Imagined is Possible*

As much as I planned to teach my BTCs to become effective teachers, I could not prepare for the unknown of teaching during the pandemic.

Yet, despite the uncertainty of these circumstances, I learned there are opportunities for transformation when engaging in critical education. The transformation I witnessed were the compassion and empathy BTCs developed for the students they will serve, and my own transformation as an instructor who learned the importance of relinquishing power to build trust and create a course culture rooted in humanizing pedagogies. By establishing flexible participation and attendance, incorporating weekly check-ins that prioritized mental health, and engaging in pedagogical practices that promoted self-reflection, we redirected our attention inward and towards one another in the cultivation of a community of candidates who learned to develop and work together.

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